

# Immigrant Women

BY

J. M. CAMPBELL

Paper read at the New Jersey Conference of Charities and  
Correction, Princeton, N. J., April 3, 1911

New York and New Jersey Committee  
North American Civic League for Immigrants  
127 Madison Avenue, New York



JV6475  
C3

## Immigrant Women

---

### What Can Be Done to Elevate the Standard of the Immigrant Home?

#### PREJUDICE AGAINST IMMIGRANTS.

I doubt whether there is any subject on which prejudice is as pronounced as on questions dealing with immigration: every one has an opinion and no one is afraid of expressing it. The feeling between restrictionists and anti-restrictionists runs so high there seems no possibility of getting the advocates of these two camps together on any of the immigrant problems actually in our midst.

I had better at once confess to my own prejudice. I have long held out against connecting the immigrant with either Charities or Correction, feeling that while immigrants create problems calling for protection, assimilation, distribution and education, for the present their problem is economic and industrial rather than with the dependent or defective class. But that you should be willing to discuss the immigrant woman, and especially with the idea of raising the standard of the immigrant home, encourages me to feel that perhaps your charity is of the broader kind,—the charity that “suffereth long and is kind,” “believeth all things, hopeth all things,”—the charity that “never faileth” and that in your consideration of the immigrant women you will have faith in the spirit with which they come among us, hope in the good that may result from their struggle to bring greater opportunities to their families and charity

toward those who fail in their efforts to rise to the standards of our complex civilization.

It may be unnecessary for me to ask this here, but there is little doubt that race prejudice is one of our present-day evils, the unreasonable prejudice against immigrant people amounting almost to a belief that they are different and not entitled to the same treatment and consideration we accord to our own race, or as sanctioned by the Golden Rule.

#### THEIR GOOD POINTS.

Why this should extend to the immigrant woman, I do not know,—unless it is that we fear most the things we are least able to understand, and we feel there must be something peculiar about a woman who, in the spirit of the pioneers, blazes her way and settles amongst us, earning her living, leading her independent life, asking nothing, offering nothing and showing only a stern face, when we know that the change in the conditions of living are at times almost unbearable, and home-sickness and dis-illusion are eating into her very soul. This uncomplaining bravery is the stuff that heroes are made of, but the aloofness of heroes is sometimes trying to live with, and we distrust what we do not understand. Probably the consensus of opinion about immigrants is that the men constitute a problem, the women are utterly impossible and the only hope lies in the coming generation. Yet when we break through the barrier of language, we find the woman very human and not so different from her American sister of immigrant ancestry. She is usually just as devoted a mother, having the same pride in, and making just as many sacrifices for, her children, from whom she demands perhaps more respect than we do, until the spirit of American inde-



pendence ingulfs the family and the parents have to succumb before the children's ready mastery of the language, their wage-earning power and more speedy introduction to the customs of the country. The unmarried women are just as fond of social contact and eager to meet their kind as the rest of us: they have the same feminine fondness for dress, even if their taste runs to an over-abundance of petticoats, instead of a lack of them, and a gay head-handkerchief rather than the Paris head-dress, expensive out of all proportion to its value, coveted by their American sisters.

Where they exceed us in virtue is perhaps in their friendly kindness, their readiness not only to divide, but to give up for their less fortunate neighbors; to share their food, clothing and shelter and do it with such tact that the sting of accepting help is taken away. And how quickly they forget what they have done! I recall an instance where a nine weeks' old infant was left on my hands after nine o'clock at night by a Polish man whose wife had died leaving three children under four years of age. On his return from work that day his landlady told him she could not keep the baby any longer—it cried too much, so he started out with it after supper and had failed to find a relative or friend in a position to care for it. When it was forced upon me, I telephoned to two hospitals, a day nursery and an orphan asylum, only to find them all profuse in apologies and promises, but unequal to the emergency. In despair I turned to a widow with four young children who promptly laid her own baby across the foot of the bed in order that she might make room for the little stranger on her pillow, and when a few days later I tried to thank her for her care she silenced me with the remark—"Who could shut the door on such a little shrimp as that?"—and absolutely refused to take one cent for her trouble, though I knew she was struggling with a burden of unpaid rent. What the immi-

grant women lack in social usage and American habits of living is more than made up by their more trusting faith and perhaps a finer spiritual grain which must be behind their unquestioning acceptance of the hard conditions circumstances force upon them and their readiness to overlook the many injustices of which they are so often the victims.

While I know these people often sin from weakness, passion or ignorance, it is seldom from hardness of heart and I do not think we can expect to gain their confidence or assistance until we have learned to admire their evident virtues; their uncomplaining bravery, their adaptability, their respect for authority, their eagerness to learn and ambition for their children, as well as their abiding faith in American ideals, all of which should command our greatest respect.

#### WHAT THEY NEED.

The immigrant woman comes to us usually creating the same problems that the immigrant man does, for these people are strangers and must find a home: they are seeking a livelihood and must find work; they are ignorant, so need protection and education, but the problem becomes more complicated by the additional question of sex and morality: and our responsibility becomes greater, for when the immigrant woman comes here, she is apt to remain and is the founder of the home of our future American citizens. On the immigrant family the economic pressure bears the hardest. They must accept the lowest wages being ignorant and unable to cope with an industrial system which, trading on their ignorance of conditions and the standards of living here, withholds from them the reward to which their labor entitles them. They must buy in the smallest quantities and at the highest prices and meet the deficit by home work,

child labor and over-crowding at the peril of health, virtue and life. But it will not do for us to be unmindful of the fact that the diseases bred of poverty, vice and sickness are just as contagious to the native American as to our foreign-born residents. In considering what New Jersey can do to raise the standard of the immigrant home, I think we had better begin with the advice given for making hare soup—"First catch your hare." See first that they have "homes" to live in. When you find twenty-four families living in a twenty-four roomed shack, in your agricultural sections, lacking every facility for cleanliness and comfort, as it is only to be used during certain seasons of the year: or seventeen women boarding in a four-roomed flat in the heart of the tenement section in one of your smaller cities, the only facilities for washing being the kitchen sink, the wonder is that they can be even presentably clean. Picture to yourselves what you would do if you had to share a sleeping room, and a small room at that, with four other women; or the four rooms with sixteen other women and had to buy your own provisions and cook them on a common stove after having worked on your feet all day in the noise of the machinery of a textile mill with never a minute's privacy anywhere. Yet I never saw a more kindly lot of girls, those earning seven and eight dollars a week, caring, as a matter of course, for the newcomer who as an apprentice earned nothing at all. They had all come from the same village: sixteen families (for no two girls had the same surname) had seen their young daughter,—they ranged in age from seventeen to twenty-four,—launch out for a strange country, and face unknown dangers, lured by the hope of earning from \$3.00 to \$7.00 a week. But the home-sickness was shown by the eagerness with which they drew forth from a trunk,—which also revealed clothing, boots, a large loaf of dark bread, cheese and bologna,—a



colored postcard of a tiny village surrounded by poppy-crowded wheat fields with the Tatra mountains in the background, which they showed with evident pride as their home in the old country.

Will you tell me how we can expect decent living conditions when a four-room apartment, even though it does conform to the latest tenement-house laws, contains six males and nine females, consisting of three married couples, four single women, two single men and three children under four, all to be accommodated in four rooms? It is a travesty to call such places homes, and I could go on multiplying similar examples indefinitely. To my mind, until New Jersey sees to it that such conditions are not allowed to exist, we cannot look to the immigrant women for miracles. I know it may work hardship on the immigrant laborer, where inadequate wages make lodgers the only solution of the problem of living, but if you want better standards you will have to see that your manufacturers pay decent wages—*fight* for a moral minimum wage—or make up your minds to raise your tax rate and support in your charitable institutions some of those who must go to the wall if such conditions are broken up. Many immigrants are living at a lower standard here than they did in their own country. Congestion easily creeps in, but is hard to root out and calls for eternal vigilance. You need more tenement and sanitary inspectors: if your local board of health cannot get the appropriation to secure them, get your women's clubs and church societies to support preferably *women* inspectors and let them work under and report to the local board of health; they are just as necessary as missionaries to the heathen. A sympathetic woman inspector could work wonders in showing tenement people how to adjust themselves: let them explain the relation of landlords to tenants, and in telling that the law com-



pels landlords to provide light rooms and outside windows, it is an easy matter to add that tenants have duties and should not use their air-shafts as their dumping ground, or the bath-tubs, if they are fortunate enough to have them, as coal bins. A knowledge of their rights under the law would soon put an end to the fear of reporting necessary repairs in case the rent will be raised. I have in mind a case where fourteen families were without running water for three weeks one winter because every one was afraid to report that the pipes had "bust."

Get visiting nurses among your people, they are the workers of miracles in raising standards and improving conditions. The immigrant is suspicious of hospitals and seldom has the cash to pay doctor's fees, so when sickness comes the advice of neighbors and mid-wives is readily followed often with disastrous results. I knew of a case where an infant's head was treated for eczema with ink which caused erysipelas and the child died within twenty-four hours. On trying to find out why the people thought ink would cure the disease, I learned that in Hungary the peasants make their own ink from sloe berries, which may have some healing properties. It is not easy to change the traditions of a race and it may take more than one visit to convince a woman that it is quite unnecessary in this climate to tie up her baby's head in a handkerchief, especially if she has no clothing on the rest of its body; or that coffee and beer are hardly as nutritious for young children as milk, but the right sort of nurse will win out every time and her only rival is the kindergartner, who in bringing out her baby's accomplishments usually wins the heart of the mother though they may not have a word in common.

I do not think immigrant women respond very readily to "absent treatment" and if you think their methods of preparing food might be improved upon, you will have to go

among them and run your cooking classes in their society halls and lodges: they will hardly attend classes in schools, except probably the young girls, but the reception received at their societies is so cordial one's head is apt to be turned; the gratitude and deference shown being all out of proportion to the effort made to assist them. We are missing an enormous power if we do not work in connection with the foreign societies which control the different nationalities in all our communities.

#### LABOR.

In entering the labor field, the immigrant woman is handicapped from the fact that for domestic service, where the demand exceeds the supply, the point of contact must come through the employment agency which is the chief training school and distributing point for thousands of immigrant women every year. Here is where they get their instruction as to what will be expected of them and also what they must demand: here it is that they are most frequently exploited. Your New Jersey Employment Agency law is good, but it is your responsibility to see that it is properly enforced. I do not think there is any corruption in the case of the officials charged with enforcing the laws, only laxity which has resulted in a low moral tone in addition to the evasions of the law. In one of your towns containing twenty-five agencies, twenty-three licensed and two unlicensed, every one of them were found breaking the law in some particular and seven of them considered propositions to supply help for a disorderly house. In another New Jersey town one agency is breaking the law on sixteen different counts. This is your responsibility: in her ignorance the immigrant woman is helpless against exploitation, but the treatment received in these places often changes their idea of what constitutes justice in America.

Domestic employment does not prove the realization of the immigrant woman's dream. She has come here to work for higher wages, a home and greater freedom, and when the difficulties which must arise when two civilizations meet in daily contact under one roof, when on one side there is difference of language, religion, past experience and the dread of being homeless if discharged at an hour's notice; and on the other little sympathy, advanced standards and a lack of democratic spirit, it is little wonder that the immigrant woman soon deserts for the shop, or factory. There she is sure to get better hours, more definite duties, no social isolation and less pronounced discrimination, which more than makes up for the better living conditions of domestic service which *might* be of the greatest value in Americanizing immigrant women. Employers should realize that they are working with human beings, not machines, and accord them treatment which will tend to elevate the scale of human progress and friendliness.

In the shop and factory again the woman is at a disadvantage for the barrier of language and lack of previous training which might produce a leader prevents co-operation for mutual support to a greater extent than even among immigrant men, and when cuts in wages and hours are made in dull seasons, the immigrant woman is apt to be the first victim. Scale of wages paid to immigrant women is too complicated a matter to discuss, but if, as has been so clearly put by Mr. Brandeis in his brief on the Oregon ten-hour case, which has since been confirmed by the United States Supreme Court—"The very existence of the State depends on the character of its citizens, therefore if industrial conditions are forcing the workers below the standard of decency, it becomes possible to deduct the right of State regulation," and that the immigrant woman may not become your wards for either charity or correction it may be neces-



sary for you to invoke State aid to secure a minimum wage law. When you find that the combined wages for a household of sixteen women one week last summer was \$48, an average of \$3 apiece to cover all their expenses—and the fact that it is the dull season in the factory does not obviate the necessity for food and shelter—and when you add to the scant food and crowded quarters the trying heat, bringing depleted will-power, is it not a wonder that these young women have not already been lured from the path of virtue?

Probably the hardest lot the immigrant woman has to face in this country is when she has to labor in the agricultural sections and canneries, adding to her own labor that of her children, with the worst possible housing conditions and so little opportunity to care for her family: conditions which are a blight upon our civilization and which we would deplore in Europe, but are entirely oblivious to in our own State. We cannot build up a sound citizenship until workers are protected in the industries which require their labor, and State supervision may be just as necessary in the agricultural fields, canneries, labor camps and small communities as for the city factories.

#### PROTECTION.

At many points the immigrant woman needs our protection equally with the immigrant man, as for instance, in the courts, where the immigrant's only chance of justice depends on the services of an interpreter, in many places strangely lacking: in the supervision of the immigrant banks to which they commit their savings: in protection at the docks and stations from those who would take advantage of their lack of knowledge of the language, our currency, the distances and modes of travel, to fleece them of the few



dollars they must possess to enter the country, which is often their whole capital with which to start life in a strange land, and at the hands of shyster lawyers, notaries, matrimonial agencies, and from fake advertisements of doctors, etc. But there is one place where the danger is greatest to the woman. This is in connection with recreation. The immigrant races coming to us now are the pleasure-loving people from the south of Europe, accustomed to find their amusement out-of-doors in their own country, where the village green is the social centre and parades and dances their expression of enjoyment. Here, where the industrial pressure is so great that the need for diversion is greater, we drive immigrant women to dance halls connected with saloons, which in exchange for their amusement they are bound to patronize, and then deplore the fact that the servants go to balls and return to your homes at dawn, dead drunk! These places are usually fire-traps and are the haunts of every variety of unscrupulous villain. I remember on one occasion being with a young Russian looking on at the gay crowd in one of your dance-halls, when he turned to me and said, "It is hard to realize that these places are really the entrance to hell, and if a girl slips here her way is greased all the way down." We cannot choke the natural love of pleasure, or the necessity for relaxation, but we can see that decent places of amusement are provided—that our parks contain dance pavilions open to immigrants where they may give expression to a pleasure as beautiful as it is innocent under proper conditions. Visit the dance halls in the immigrant sections of your own cities—see the attractions the beer gardens offer—then read what Chicago has done in providing recreation centres in the parks and playgrounds. I have too much faith in New Jersey to believe you will be satisfied to let things remain as they are in the majority of your towns to-day.

## EDUCATION.

Perhaps the most difficult problem with the immigrant woman is to make her appreciate the advantages of education, which to her is something only for the men and children. Her lot in life has always been the dull routine of manual work and the raising of many children and it is hard to make her understand that apart from the book learning, of which she is very suspicious, education might mean methods of making her work easier, or giving her children better care. While these women appreciate that a knowledge of English will be an advantage, the majority cannot be persuaded to attend night schools. I think sewing classes and even cooking might be offered as a bait, but the immigrant woman is not apt to remain in school unless she is met by some one who speaks her own language.

There is one point on which I think we are sadly remiss in regard to immigrants and that is in not advertising the existing agencies of relief which as indirect taxpayers they are in a measure supporting.

I took occasion last summer to ask every person in four houses, one on each of four parallel streets in one of your small New Jersey towns, what provision they had against the day of sickness or accident, which is sure to come to us all, and whether they knew of the departments to which they could apply for help? Of the 188 people in these four houses—and you would hardly consider them tenements—(one was a single flat over a store) ;

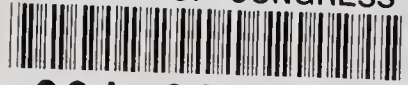
119 had no knowledge of the city physician ;

155 had no knowledge of the visiting nurse ;

145 had no knowledge of the poor master ;

And 119 had no knowledge of the day nursery.

The two hospitals in the town had been well advertised, for only 15 out of the 188 had not heard of these. The



majority of these people had no money in reserve; carried no life insurance or sick benefit, and when they did it was usually the children who were protected rather than the wage earner. An amusing instance, if it had not been pathetic, was a case of a Syrian family, who knew nothing of any of the existing relief agencies, who had no money in reserve in this country nor any life insurance or sick benefit, but were depositing money in a bank in Syria, were sending over payments for life insurance and sick benefit and at that very moment an old woman was tottering on the brink of her grave and being doctored with a concoction of herbs, which if as deadly as evil-smelling, meant funeral expenses long before money or any assistance could be gotten from Syria to help to meet them.

A simple statement of the relief agencies and of the laws concerning the conditions of life in your own communities, printed in the languages of your immigrant population would do a great deal to dispel the present ignorance of our customs, which is doubtless at the bottom of the prejudice against immigrant people.

For the immigrant woman I can only bespeak your assistance and protection so that the spirit of freedom and justice on which your constitution is founded shall be her inheritance and that her faith in American ideals shall not be shattered.

BROOKLYN EAGLE PRESS.